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ABSTRACT

Using a writing journal with adult literacy students is an effective way to introduce them to writing while working with their reading, self-esteem, and confidence levels. One type of journal that combines the skills of reading and writing is the reader response journal. In these journal exercises, the students read a story or section of a story to the teacher, who then asks them to respond to some questions. The dialogue journal is appropriate for students in a very basic reading and writing program. Typically, a dialogue journal may begin with the teacher writing a short entry about something that is familiar to the student. By beginning the dialogue journal with the teacher or tutor, students feel less threatened and generally are more willing to write. Students' writing skills are not evaluated in dialogue journals; students are encouraged to focus on what they are writing rather than how it is written. A spinoff of the dialogue journal is a self-esteem journal with assignments that get the students thinking about aspects of their life that they may not have considered before. The teacher puts quotations, sayings, or parts of essays into the student's journal. Normally, the quotes would center around a particular theme, such as self-esteem or a positive attitude. Suggestions for teachers include the following: not being afraid to experiment, asking the students, repeating assignments that work, being patient, getting students comfortable with writing, and writing with the students. Contains eight references. (YLB)

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Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Teacher To Teacher

USING WRITING JOURNALS IN THE ADULT LITERACY CLASSROOM

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by Bryan A. Bardine
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Have you ever been unable to get a student interested in learning to write? Or have you ever wondered about some non-threatening ways to begin a writing program with your adult literacy students? I face these problems often with my students at Goodwill Industries of the Miami Valley, Inc., and I have found that using a writing journal with the majority of them is an effective way to introduce them to writing while still working with their reading, self-esteem, and confidence levels. Throughout this article I will discuss three types of journals as well as different assignments that some colleagues and I have used with our adult learners.

Writing researchers such as Sally Barr-Reagan (1986), Marilyn Sternglass (1988), and June Cannell Birnbaum (1982) have stressed the importance of combining reading and writing instruction in the classroom. As adult literacy instructors, we know the value of using reading and writing activities to reinforce each other and to help students strengthen their skills in both areas. One type of journal that combines these two skills is the reader response journal. Reader response theorists (Karolides, 1992) believe that readers' understanding of a text is derived from their background, their personal experiences, and what knowledge they bring to the text. In these journal exercises, I ask my students to read me a story or section of a story, and after they have completed it, I ask them to respond to some questions that I give them. This type of exercise can be done with any level of reader.

In the spring of 1994, I taught a small group writing class with students whose reading levels ranged from fourth grade through college level. I asked each of the students to bring in a newspaper or magazine article on a topic they were interested in and to write a response to whatever issue the article addressed. One student brought in an article on the release of imprisoned Dayton native Michael Fay from jail in Singapore. As a class we had an excellent discussion about the whole affair. Next, I asked the students to respond in their journals to the question: "Do you think Michael Fay deserved the punishment he received for his crime?" The students formed their own opinions and wrote them in their journals.

During the short time we held the class, students brought in articles on gay rights,

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HIV-AIDS research, proficiency testing for high school students, and television violence. Often the response assignments led to exuberant class discussions where students who normally didn't contribute as much to class took a greater interest. The reading assignments helped to stimulate the students' ideas, while the journal assignments enhanced the class discussions and made the students think about the topic in some ways that they may not have originally.

Many teachers use dialogue journals (Daisey, 1993; Fuhler, 1994; Jeffers, 1994; Thep-Ackrapong, 1992). The dialogue journal is great for students in a very basic reading and writing program. Typically, a dialogue journal may begin with the teacher writing a short entry about something that is familiar to the student. Ideally, the student will feel more comfortable writing after seeing the teacher's entry. The student will know more about what an entry looks like, and the teacher's prompts can give the student a topic for the first entry. For example, a teacher may write about family, friends, or hobbies and ask the student to write about his or hers, or the teacher may write about less personal topics such as favorite foods or movies and then ask the student to do the same. By beginning the dialogue journal with the teacher or tutor, students feel less threatened and generally are more willing to write. I think this is because the teacher is sharing about his or her life and experiences also, so it's an even exchange.

Students' writing skills are not evaluated in dialogue journals. Students should be encouraged to focus on ***what*** they are writing rather than ***how*** it is written. If students are concerned about spelling, they may choose one or two words from a previous entry that they want to learn to spell correctly. Laura Wickett Maus, a colleague of mine and curriculum coordinator of the Miami Valley Literacy Council, believes that allowing the students to select the words to be studied is an important step. "It reinforces the non-threatening aspect of the dialogue journal." Ms. Maus uses the dialogue journal with one of the students whom she tutors at the MVLC. Much of the students' writing improvement will come from their modeling of the teachers' writing. The following is a section of the dialogue between Ms. Maus and her student James over the course of several months.

James: *February 19, 1994*
Laura I had a good weeing I wit to a meeting and I wit our my sister haves and I dend my homewock and I play with the cents So Laura hove waks our weeings

Ms. Maus: *Response to February 19 entry*
James, I am glad that you had a good weekend. Did you and the kids have a good time at your sister's house? What did you play with them?

My weekend was good too. Brian and I went to his mom and dad's house. We went to a family party. It was fun seeing everybody.

You have been doing well with your homework. Do you want more homework each week, or am I giving you enough?

James: *April 14, 1994*
Thins I look to do so is go to mes and play fatball and go to basebolls knes and play with the sens and go the prkek.

Ms. Maus: *April 20, 1994*
James, Did you play football when you were in school? I like to watch football games on T.V. I hate going to baseball games! The games seem to go on forever! Do you think you would like to read books about baseball or football? What about Sports Illustrated magazine? Are there any magazines you want to read? I like to read Newsweek. I also like to read novels and short stories.

It's important to notice the way that in her responses Ms. Maus modeled the words that

James misspelled in his entries. She comments, "I asked him questions that should prompt him to use those words (that he misspelled in his entry) again. I will watch to see if he spells them correctly and will keep using them until he begins to use the right spelling."

A spin off of the dialogue journal--one that I have used with one of my students--is a Self-Esteem Journal. This journal contains assignments that get the students thinking about aspects of their life that they may not have considered before. Typically, I find quotes or sayings or parts of essays and put them into the student's journal. Normally, the quotes will be around a particular theme, such as self-esteem or displaying a positive attitude. For example, one student had had a poor self-image for a long time, so I decided to try writing assignments that might make him think about things in a more positive way. I did not want to overwhelm him, so most of the quotes were short. I looked for quotes and sayings that I felt were uplifting or positive and wrote them in his journal. Next, I wrote a couple of questions for him to answer. I asked him to write two or three sentences in response. I hoped he would think about the quotes and respond to them in his writing. Here's a sample assignment:

Quote of the day: "Enthusiasm is the genius of sincerity, and truth accomplishes no victories without it."

My writing: "Here's the quote of the day! Try to keep this idea in mind all week. Remember, as you've written about before--'Nothing great is ever achieved without enthusiasm.' You have to have enthusiasm in order to succeed. In other words, this week--Be enthusiastic in all that you do! For today's quote, write in your journal what you think it means."

Normally, we would discuss the quotes and his responses to them each time he wrote in the journal. This student used the self-esteem journal for over three months, and I think his attitude about life and work improved during that time.

Writing in the journal and reflecting on self-esteem issues--combined with experiencing the supportive atmosphere provided by other Goodwill case managers, instructors and janitorial staff--contributed to this student's changed attitude. In situations like this, where students have support from more than just their teachers, it is easier for them to make positive strides. For this particular student, while his attitude changed for the better, unfortunately his opinion of writing did not. Once he left the program, the student had less contact with the same type of supportive environment he had experienced at Goodwill, but he will always have the journal as a reminder of why good self esteem and a positive attitude are an important factor in living a happy life. Each of these types of journals has been successful in various ways with my students.

In the time that I have been using journals, I have come up with a few tips that might help teachers who are just beginning to use them, since often it is difficult to begin a program with your students.

- Don't be afraid to experiment with assignments--sometimes the strangest assignments can work the best!

- Ask the students. Get their input as much as possible--often they are the best source for you as to what kinds of assignments to begin with. (I used a questionnaire at the outset of my class.)

- It's easy to repeat assignments that work well--this can be a blessing and a curse--but students may not be as enthused about them as time goes on. They may need a change of pace.

- Be patient with your writers. From my experience, journals seem to work best over time. Some students may need several months or even a year or more before considerable improvement can be seen.

- It's most important to get students comfortable with writing. For this reason, I never give a letter or number grade on a journal. I always try to offer constructive feedback and instructive comments aimed at the next time I collect the journal.

- As teachers of writing, we should write *with* our adults whenever we can. This will reinforce to the students the importance of the act of writing. It is also a good way to help the students feel on an even level with the teacher.

Using journals with your adult students is an excellent way to introduce them to the world of writing while still working on their reading, critical thinking, self-esteem, and confidence levels. The Reader Response, Dialogue, and Self-Esteem journals enable students to develop writing skills in a non-threatening, gradeless environment. The journals allow students to make mistakes and learn as they complete more assignments. They act as a record of the students' growth as writers and thinkers, and often students learn a great deal about themselves just by looking over their past works. With time and practice, students' self-esteem and confidence will grow just as much as their writing skills do. As writing teachers, most of us know the reluctance that many of our students face when it comes to putting pen to paper. It is our job to make them feel comfortable and, if possible, excited and anxious to begin writing class each day.

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